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# The End of Life in the Philosophy of Lactantius

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THE END OF LIFE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LACTANTIUS

By

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A Thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the

requirements for the degree of

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## INTRODUCTION

What is the ultimate goal at which the will of every creature aims? Perhaps this has been the most important question that has perplexed the thinkers of all ages. It is commonly accepted that every human act is done for some end. The perennial problem is to determine what is the true end of life's action. Our answer to this question is basic. It will largely determine our answer to many of the questions that constitute the province of philosophy, such as, What is man? Whence is he? Whither is he going? How shall he guide himself? What is the purpose of this vast and varied universe around him? What is man's relation to it and to the great Power behind the veil? What are man's duties to himself and to his fellow-men? What are his destinies?

Lactantius recognized that the intellectual constitution of man compels him to inquire as to the true end of life. In this thesis I have endeavoured to ascertain the end of life as found in the extant writings of Lactantius. My studies have been based on the works of Lactantius, as translated by William Fletcher, and found in Volume VII of the Ante-Nicene Fathers.

By the very nature of his writings, I have been compelled to base my findings largely on the Divine Institutes, especially Books III, IV, and VII.

Lactantius assigns his motive for writing the Institutes to the following:

"Since the truth lies veiled in obscurity; and it is either an object of contempt to the learned because it has not had suitable defenders, or it is hated by the unlearned on account of its natural severity, which the nature of men inclined to vices cannot endure.....I have believed that these errors should be encountered, that both the learned may be directed to true wisdom and the unlearned to true religion." 1.

Lactantius has always held a very high place among the Christian Fathers, not only on account of the varied subject-matter of his writings, but also on account of the erudition, the sweetness of expression, and the grace and elegance of style, by which they are characterized.<sup>2.</sup>

## Chapter II

### The Life of Lactantius

It is strange, therefore, that so little is known with certainty in regard to his personal history. It is difficult to fix with precision either the time or place of his birth,<sup>1.</sup> and even his name<sup>1.</sup> has been the subject of much discussion. It is known that Lactantius pursued his studies in the school of the celebrated rhetorician and apologist, Arnobius of Sicca in proconsular Africa.<sup>2.</sup> Hence, it has been supposed that Lactantius was a native of Africa.<sup>3.</sup> Others<sup>4.</sup> have maintained that he was born in Italy, and that his birth-place was probably Firmium. It is generally accepted that he was born about the middle of the third century.<sup>5.</sup>

Lactantius attained great eminence as a teacher of rhetoric, and when the Emperor Diocletian heard of his celebrity, he invited Lactantius to settle at Nicomedia and there practice his art.<sup>6.</sup> It has been observed<sup>7.</sup> that since Diocletian took up his permanent residence at Nicomedia in A.D. 285, the call of Lactantius thither was probably not much later than that date.

The city of Nicomedia was inhabited mainly by Greeks, and Lactantius found few pupils to instruct. St. Jerome says that this afforded Lactantius a great deal of leisure and he welcomed it as an opportunity to devote himself to authorship.<sup>8.</sup>

It is chiefly through his writings that Lactantius is known. The works which have come down to our day are mostly religious treatises of a philosophical character, the aim of which was "to sap the foundations of the heathen religion then prevalent in the Roman Empire, and to vindicate the religion of Christ."<sup>9.</sup>

The following works are the product of his pen:

<sup>10.</sup>  
The Divine Institutes, his most important work, is an exhaustive philosophic work in seven books; On the Workmanship of God, a discussion of the creation and nature of man; On the Anger of God, deals with the current theories of Providence; and On the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died, a violent treatise on the persecutions from Nero to Galerius.<sup>11.</sup> There are also ascribed to him some writings which have been lost.<sup>12.</sup> Even now, however,<sup>13.</sup> Lactantius is extant in two hundred and twenty manuscripts, the oldest of which belong to the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>14.</sup>

The style of Lactantius has been deservedly praised for the dignity, elegance, and clearness of expression by which it is characterized, and which have gained for him the appellation of the Christian Cicero.<sup>15.</sup> His writings are always lucid and well arranged. Nowhere does the reader feel an unpleasant tone of pedantry nor affectation; everywhere he is attracted by the impress of genuine learning and eloquence.<sup>16.</sup>

His reading was evidently very extensive, particularly of authors, both in prose and poetry, in whose works the current moral and religious principles were presented. To such authors he refers with much copiousness and facility and turns them to account, by showing their agreement with his own views, or by exposing their errors. However, some do not think much of his Biblical and theological erudition. 17.

It was probably during the time Lactantius was teaching at Nicomedia that he embraced the Christian faith. 18.

No doubt witnessing the superhuman constancy displayed by the Christians of that city influenced him greatly. 19. This was a period when Christians were being persecuted by the emperors with fire and sword. They were also assailed by heathen philosophers with the weapons of science, wit, and ridicule. 20.

It has been a matter of perplexity to understand how Lactantius escaped personal injury during the severe Diocletian persecution. Some think, 21. and this seems reasonable, that it was because he was generally regarded as a philosopher, and not a Christian writer. To judge from some of his writings 22. he appears to have been more attracted by the moral and philosophical aspects of Christianity than by the supernatural and dogmatic. In fact, in all the theological works of Lactantius is manifest the influence of his early studies of all the masterpieces of ancient rhetoric and philosophy. 23. In the words of Jerome,



24.  
he was "omnium suo tempore eruditissimus".

About A.D. 315 Lactantius was called to settle in Gaul and the Emperor Constantine entrusted to him the education  
25.

of his son, Crispus. In the language of Gibbon,

"Lactantius, the most eloquent of the Christians" was

"admirably qualified to form the taste, and to excite the  
26.

virtues, of his illustrious disciple."

It is commonly accepted that Lactantius died at Treves about A.D. 325.

## Chapter III

### Introduction to Moral Philosophy

Lactantius begins his philosophical discussion in the third book of the Divine Institutes, entitled, Of The False Wisdom of the Philosophers. Here he enters into conflict with the philosophers and endeavors to expose the vanity of their pretensions. He introduces us to his purpose by asserting, "For since all error arises either from false religion or from wisdom (philosophy falsely so-called), in refuting error it is necessary to overthrow both."<sup>1.</sup>

He continues by saying, "There is no reason why we should give so much honor to philosophers.....for they might speak well as men of learning; but they could not speak truly because they have not learned the truth from Him in whose power it was. Nor indeed shall we effect anything great in convincing them of their ignorance, which they themselves very often confess. Since they are not believed in that one point alone in which alone they ought to have been believed, I will endeavor to show that they never spoke so truly as when they uttered their opinion respecting their own ignorance."<sup>2.</sup>

In the Preface, Lactantius tells us that he is now engaged in a profession which is "much better, more useful and glorious", than that of oratory in which he had long been engaged.<sup>3.</sup> He says to impart the knowledge of speaking

well is deserving of respect, but how much more, he who teaches men to live in piety and innocence. For this reason the philosophers had greater glory than the orators among the Greeks; because philosophers were considered teachers of right living, which is far more excellent, since to speak well belongs merely to a few, but to live well relates to all.<sup>4.</sup>

However, Lactantius, admits that oratory has been of advantage to him because now he can plead the cause of truth with great facility. The truth may be defended without eloquence, and many have done so; yet it should be given the aid of rhetoric, so that it will influence minds more deeply, not by its own force alone, but by the light of cultivated speech which illumines it.<sup>5.</sup>

Lactantius observes that if some of the greatest orators retiring from the strife of the courts betook themselves to philosophy, hoping to find in it a respite which they did not find, then "how much more justly shall I betake myself as to a most safe harbour, to that pious, true, and divine wisdom, in which all things are ready for utterance, pleasant to the hearing, easy to be understood, honorable to be undertaken."<sup>6.</sup> And if some arbiters of justice published Institutions of civil law for the purpose of straightening contentions between discordant citizens, then it is much better and even more proper to write the Divine Institutions, whose purpose is to speak on weightier matters

of "hope, of life, of salvation, of immortality, and of God." 7.

In the opening of Book Two, Lactantius, addressing himself to the Emperor Constantine, says, that he desires to undertake the useful and greater duty of recalling men from crooked paths and of bringing them into favor with themselves, so that they will not think that man is born in vain, as some philosophers teach. 8.

Lactantius says the inquiry after truth is natural to all, but many deprive themselves of wisdom because they accept parrot-fashion the thinking of the ancestors without any judgment of their own; hence they are led by others like sheep. "What, therefore, prevents us from taking such a precedent from them," says Lactantius, "That as they handed down to posterity their false inventions, so we who have discovered the truth may hand down better things to our posterity?" 9.

In the opening of the Third Book, Lactantius expresses a desire that the power of eloquence had fallen to his lot, that truth, supported by talent as well as by its own force, might refute error and introduce among the human race a brilliant light. 10. A little later he admits that "I bear it with equanimity that a moderate degree of talent has been granted to me". 11. However, he asserts that it is not in reliance upon eloquence, but upon the truth, that this work is undertaken. 12. He says that is a work perhaps too great

for his human strength; but even if he fail "the truth  
itself will complete, with the aid of God, whose office  
this is." 13.

Lactantius felt that this was no small task  
and he expected to put his best into it. He says that he  
never came to pleading causes in public, indicating that  
this was due to what he calls his lack of eloquence; though  
he urges that in speaking of the end of life, the goodness  
of this cause must make him eloquent. 14.

And in the  
conclusion of his work on the Workmanship of God, Lactantius  
lays bare his heart and earnestly asks, "Shall we suffer  
the truth to be extinguished or crushed," He states that  
he is determined to commit to writing as much as possible  
which has any bearing on the happy life. 15.  
He tells us  
that he wishes to live for no other reason than that he  
might effect something worthy of life and useful to his  
readers. And when he has accomplished this, Lactantius  
says that he will have lived enough and discharged his duty  
if his labor shall have "freed some men from errors, and  
have directed them to the path which leads to heaven." 16.

So much for the purpose which motivated Lactantius  
in writing the Divine Institutes. He observes that the  
etymology of the word philosophy indicates not the possess-  
ion of wisdom, but a striving after it; and in its ultimate  
result it leaves us nothing but mere opinion and uncertainty.  
He says, "They who apply themselves to philosophy do not

devote themselves to the pursuit of wisdom, but they imagine that they do so, because they know not where that is which they are searching for or of what character it is.....It is either sought in an improper manner, or not sought at all." 17.

Lactantius then proceeds to note the want of agreement among the various philosophers. He points out that they are divided into many sects and all entertain various sentiments, and asks the question, "In which do we place the truth? It certainly cannot be in all." 18.  
19.

Some philosophers claim knowledge and others deny it. Lactantius says, "Between these two kinds of philosophy I see that there is disagreement, and as it were, civil war. On which side shall we place wisdom, which cannot be torn asunder?" 20. Again he asks, "Does wisdom nowhere exist? Yes indeed. It was amongst them, but no one saw it." 21.

After showing that philosophy is groundless as a trustworthy criterion, Lactantius passes to the subject of moral philosophy and the chief good. Here he distinguishes natural philosophy from moral philosophy. In natural philosophy there is only delight; in moral philosophy there is utility also. It is more dangerous to commit a fault in arranging the condition of life and informing the character. Hence, the great diligence must be used that we may know how we ought to live. In natural philosophy some indulgence may be granted for it does no permanent injury, but in moral philosophy,

"there is no room for difference of opinion nor error. All must entertain the same sentiments, and philosophy itself must give instruction as it were with one mouth; because if any error shall be committed, life is altogether overthrown." 22

Lactantius then carries the inquiry still further and asks, 23.

"Let us see whether they (the philosophers) agree or what assistance they give us for the better guidance of life....Let us select one and especially that which is the chief and principal thing (the true end of life) in which the whole of wisdom centers and depends."

Chapter IV  
The End of Life in the History  
of Philosophy

What has been the chief good or the end of life in the history of philosophy? Lactantius answers this question quite briefly, and says that Epicurus deemed the chief good to consist in pleasure of the mind, while for Aristippus<sup>1.</sup> the end of life was pleasure of the body.

Diodorus united virtue with the privation of pain,<sup>2.</sup> while Callipho and Dinomachus connected it with pleasure.

In what did Hieronymus place the chief good?<sup>3.</sup> Lactantius says that it was in the absence of pain.

The Peripatetics differ in their conception of the end of life and place it in the goods of the mind, the body,<sup>4.</sup> and of fortune.

The chief good of Herillus, according to Lactantius,<sup>5.</sup> is knowledge.

For Zeno, the end of life was to live agreeably to<sup>6.</sup> nature.

Lactantius indicates that certain Stoics said the<sup>7.</sup> chief good was to follow virtue.

The last to be mentioned is Aristotle, and Lactantius accounts him as placing the end of life in integrity and<sup>8.</sup> virtue.

Lactantius is of the opinion that the system of



Epicurus was more generally followed than that of any of the other philosophers; <sup>9.</sup> not because it brings forward any truth, but because the attractive name of pleasure invites <sup>10.</sup> many. He further accounts for Epicurus' success by saying <sup>11.</sup> that every one is naturally inclined to vices.

He attempts to show how the philosophy of Epicurus wins acceptance because the latter adapts his teachings to the likes of every man:

"Moreover, for the purpose of drawing the multitude to himself, he (Epicurus) speaks that which is specially adapted to each character separately. He forbids the idle to apply himself to learning; he releases the covetous man from giving largesses to the people; he prohibits the inactive man from undertaking the business of the state, the sluggish from bodily exercise, the timid from military service. The irreligious is told that the gods pay no attention to the conduct of men; the man who is unfeeling and selfish is ordered to give nothing to any one, for that the wise man does everything on his own account. To a man who avoids the crowd, solitude is praised. One who is too sparing learns that life can be sustained on water and meal. If a man hates his wife, the blessings of celibacy are enumerated to him; to one who has bad children, the happiness of those who are without children is proclaimed; against unnatural parents it is said that there is no bond of nature. To the man who is delicate and incapable of endurance, it is said that pain is the greatest of all evils; to the man of fortitude, it is said that the wise man is happy even under tortures. The man who devotes himself to the pursuit of influence and distinction is enjoined to pay court to kings; he who cannot endure annoyance is enjoined to shun the abode of kings. Thus the crafty man collects an assembly from various and differing characters; and while

he lays himself out to please all, he is more at variance with himself than they all are with one another." 12.

Lactantius, however, does not want his readers to read this criticism without understanding in a measure at least, the background and origin of the system of Epicurus. He relates<sup>13.</sup> how that Epicurus saw that the good are often subject to adversities, poverty, labors, exile, and loss of dear friends. On the other hand, he saw that the wicked were happy, they had influence, and were loaded with honors. Epicurus saw that innocence was unprotected, that crimes were committed without punishment. He realized that death waged without regard to character, without any discrimination of age. That which especially moved him, says Lactantius, was the fact that "religious men were especially visited with weightier evils, whereas he saw that lesser evils or none at all fell upon those who altogether neglected the gods, or worshipped them in an impious manner."<sup>14.</sup>

"Therefore," remarks Lactantius, "when Epicurus reflected on these things, induced as it were by the injustice of these matters (for thus it appeared to him in his ignorance of the cause and subject), he thought that there was no providence. And having persuaded himself of this, he undertook also to defend it, and thus he entangled himself in inextricable errors."<sup>15.</sup>

After quite a lengthy discussion of the consequences

of Epicurus' denial of providence, Lactantius points out that as a result of the false principles at the beginning of his system, he ended up as an "advocate of most disgraceful pleasure, and said that man was born for its enjoyment."  
17.

If it were true that man was born for the enjoyment of disgraceful pleasure, Lactantius points out the consequences of such belief and indicates what bearing it would have on a man's life and end. If there were no providence and no immortality why should man avoid vice in this life. It would inevitably lead to the indulgence of pleasure in every conceivable manner; and why not, if God does not care and in a short time death will end all?

"Who, when he hears this affirmed, would abstain from the practice of vice and wickedness? For if the soul is doomed to perish, let us eagerly pursue riches, that we may be able to enjoy all kinds of indulgence; and if these are wanting to us, let us take them away from those who have by stealth, by stratagem, or by force, especially if there is no God who regards the actions of men: as long as the hope of impunity shall favour us, let us plunder, and put to death. For it is the part of the wise man to do evil, if it is advantageous to him, and safe; since, if there is a God in heaven, He is not angry with any one. It is also equally the part of the foolish man to do good; because, as he is not excited with anger, so he is not influenced by favour. Therefore, let us live in the indulgence of pleasures in every possible way; for in a short time we shall not exist at all. Therefore, let us suffer

no day, in short, no moment of life, to pass away from us without pleasure; lest, since we ourselves are doomed to perish, the life which we have already spent should itself also perish." 18.

Lactantius suggests that Epicurus does not say these things in word, but he does teach them in fact. 191 He continues by saying that when Epicurus maintains that the man of wisdom does everything for his own sake, that he really refers all his actions to his own advantage. If any one accepts this philosophy "he will neither think that any good ought to be done, since the conferring of benefits has reference to the advantage of another; nor that he ought to abstain from guilt, because the doing of evil is attended with gain." 20.

The criticism is carried even further when Lactantius suggests that if a leader of pirates or robbers were urging his men to deeds of violence what better suited language could he use than that of Epicurus, which he enumerates as follows:

"That the gods take no notice; that they are not affected with anger nor kind feelings; that the punishment of a future state is not to be dreaded, because souls die after death, and that there is no future state of punishment at all; that pleasure is the greatest good; that there is no society among men; that every one consults his own interest; that there is no one who loves another, unless it be for his own sake; that death is not to be feared by a brave man, nor any pain; for that he, even if he should be tormented and burned, should say that

21.  
he does not regard it."

22.  
In another work, Lactantius says that Epicurus maintained that the end of life was pleasure of the soul, and criticizes it by saying,

"What is pleasure of the soul but joy, in which the soul for the most part luxuriates, and unbends itself either to sport or to laughter? But this good befalls even dumb animals, which, when they are satisfied with pasture, relax themselves to joy and wantonness." 23.

Concerning Aristippus, the founder of the Cyrenaic sect, who thought that bodily pleasure was the end of life, Lactantius says, that he "ought to be removed from the number of philosophers and from the society of men, because he compared himself to a beast." 24.

Lactantius also writes the following bitter criticism:

"I do not consider Aristippus even worthy of an answer; for since he is always rushing into pleasures of the body, and is only the slave of sensual indulgences, no one can regard him as a man; for he lived in such a manner that there was no difference between him and a brute, except this only, that he had the faculty of speech.... Shall we then seek precepts of living from these men, who have no other feelings than those of the irrational creatures?" 25.

, If we follow such a one, Lactantius feels that we must contend that virtue is to be praised in accordance with its capacity of yielding pleasure. Shall we therefore seek wisdom from those who evince not the least possession of it, who differ from cattle and brutes, not in feeling,

but in language?

In criticizing the end of life of Dinomachus and Callipho, who approved of honourable pleasure, Lactantius briefly says, that "they either said the same that Epicurus did, that bodily pleasure is dishonourable; or if they considered bodily pleasures to be partly base and partly honourable, then that is not the chief good which is ascribed to the body."<sup>27.</sup>

Concerning Hieronymus who held the end of life to be without pain, and Diodorus who said it was to cease to be in pain,<sup>28.</sup> Lactantius says,

"But the other animals avoid pain, and when they are without pain, or cease to be in pain, are glad. What distinction, then, shall be given to man, if his chief good is judged to be common with the beasts?"<sup>29.</sup>

The Peripatetics said that the true end of life consisted of the goods of the soul, the body, and of fortune.<sup>30.</sup> In regard to their philosophy, Lactantius says,

"The goods of the soul may be approved of; but if they require assistance for the completion of happiness, they are plainly weak. But the goods of the body and of fortune are not in the power of man; nor is that now the chief good which is assigned to the body, or to things placed without us, because this double good extends even to the cattle which have need of being well, and of a due supply of food."<sup>31.</sup>

The Pyrrhonist, Herillus, held knowledge to be the true end of life,<sup>32.</sup> and Lactantius agrees that this good belongs to man, and to the soul only, but it may happen to

him without virtue. He reasons that a person who has either learned anything by hearing or reading is not to be considered happy. Nor is it a definition of the true end of life because there may be knowledge of either bad things, or even useless things. But even if we have acquired knowledge of good and useful things by labour, still it is not the true end of life because knowledge is not to be sought on its own account, but on account of something else.

Lactantius then gives an example and says that the arts are learned either to be means of support, or a source of glory, or even of pleasure; and it is plain that these things cannot be the end of life.

34.

35.

In one place, Lactantius criticizes the end of life in Zeno as being a very general one because all animals live agreeably to nature, and each has its own nature. In the Divine Institutes, however, he is more explicit:

"Let us also hear Zeno, for he at times dreams of virtue. The chief good, he says, is to live in accordance with nature. Therefore we must live after the manner of the brutes. For in these are found all the things which ought to be absent from man: they are eager for pleasures, they fear, they deceive, they lie in wait, they kill; and that which is especially to the point, they have no knowledge of God. Why, therefore, does he teach me to live according to nature, which is of itself prone to a worse course, and under the influence of some more soothing blandishments plunges headlong into vices? Or if he says that the nature of brutes is different from the nature of man, because man is born to virtue, he says something to the purpose; but, however, it will not be a definition of the chief good, because

there is no animal which does not live in accordance with its nature." 36.

Lactantius makes rather brief mention of the Stoics in his criticism of their end of life. He says that it is usually thought that the Stoics have entertained much better views and held that virtue was the true end of life. "But," says Lactantius, "Virtue cannot be the chief good, since if it is the endurance of evils and of labours, it is not happy of itself; but it ought to effect and produce the chief good, because it cannot be attained without the greatest difficulty and labour." 37.

Concerning Aristotle, even, Lactantius doesn't have a very sympathetic spirit as is evidenced by these words:

"In truth, Aristotle wandered far from reason, who connected honour with virtue, as though it were possible for virtue at any time to be separated from honour, or to be united with baseness." 38.

Lactantius enlarges a little more upon his criticism by saying in this connection,

"But he (that is, Aristotle) saw that it might happen that a bad opinion is entertained respecting virtue by a depraved judgment, and therefore he thought that deference should be paid to what in the estimation of men constitutes a departure from what is right and good, because it is not in our power that virtue should be honoured simply for its own deserts. For what is honourable character, except perpetual honour, conferred on any one by the favourable report of the people? What, then, will happen, if through the error and perverseness of men a bad reputation should ensue? Shall we cast aside virtue because it is judged to be base and disgraceful by the foolish? And since it is capable of being



oppressed and harrassed, in order that it may be of itself a peculiar and lasting good, it ought to stand in need of no outward assistance, so as not to depend by itself upon its own strength, and to remain steadfast. And thus no good is to be hoped by it from man, nor is any evil to be refused." 39.

And in summing up his criticism of the end of life in these various philosophers, Lactantius remarks,

"Therefore the philosophers do not observe the rule even in moral philosophy, inasmuch as they are at variance with one another on the main point itself, that is, in that discussion by which the life is moulded. For the precepts cannot be equal, or resembling one another, when some train men to pleasure, others to honour, others indeed to nature, others to knowledge; some to the pursuit, others to the avoiding of riches; some to entire insensibility to pain, others to the endurance of evils; in all which, as I have shown before, they turn aside from reason, because they are ignorant of God." 40.

Why was there all this difference of opinion among these men of wisdom? Lactantius ascribes it to the following:

"This was especially the cause of all the errors of the philosophers, that they did not comprehend the system of the world, which comprises the whole of wisdom. But it cannot be comprehended by our own perception and innate intelligence, which they wished to do by themselves without a teacher. Therefore they fell into various and oftentimes contradictory opinions, out of which they had no way of escape,

41.

And they remained fixed in the same mire, as the cosmic writer says, since their conclusion does not correspond with their assumptions; inasmuch as they assumed things to be true which could not be affirmed, and proved

without the knowledge of the truth and of heavenly things.....Man cannot attain this knowledge by reflection or disputation, but by learning and hearing from Him who alone is able to know and to teach." 42.

In looking back over the things he had said concerning the end of life in all of these philosophers, Lactantius seems to be soliloquizing when he says,

"I wonder, therefore, that there was none at all of the philosophers who discovered the abode and dwelling-place of the chief good. For they might have sought it in this manner. Whatever the greatest good is, it must be an object proposed to all men. There is pleasure, which is desired by all; but this is common also to men with the beasts, and has not the force of the honourable, and brings a feeling of satiety, and when it is in excess is injurious, and it is lessened by advance of age, and does not fall to the lot of many: for they who are without resources, who constitute the greater part of men, must also be without pleasure. Therefore pleasure is not the true chief good; but it is not even a good." 43.

In regard to riches, he says in relation to his remarks above, concerning pleasure,

"This is much more true of them. For they fall to the lot of fewer men, and that generally by chance; and they often fall to the indolent, and sometimes by guilt, and they are desired by those who already possess them." 44.

And in regard to sovereignty, Lactantius remarks, "That does not constitute the chief good: for all cannot reign, but it is necessary that all should be capable of attaining the chief good." 45.

In concluding this chapter I feel it well worth while to be this rather lengthy citation from the Divine Institutes because it appears that Lactantius thinks that perhaps some of his readers may have become weary of his criticism of the end of life in all of these philosophies; some may even despair of arriving at the correct solution of the true end. To counteract this, he suggests that now, after denying the validity of all these others, let us seek something held forth to all. He says we should not despair of being able to find the true end of life, and urges his readers to remember that this is a matter of no small importance.

"Let us seek something therefore which is held forth to all. Is it virtue? It cannot be denied that virtue is a good, and undoubtedly a good for all men. But if it cannot be happy because its power and nature consist in the endurance of evil, it assuredly is not the chief good..... But what shall we say that it is? Pleasure? But nothing that is base can arise from that which is honourable. Shall we say that it is riches? or commands? But these things are frail and uncertain. It is glory? or honour? or a lasting name? But all these things are not contained in virtue itself, but depend upon the opinion and judgment of others..... Why should I say that the duties or virtue consist in the despising of all these things? For not to long for, or desire, or love pleasures, riches, dominions, and honours, and all those things which are esteemed as goods, as others do overpowered by desire, that assuredly is virtue. Therefore it effects something else more sublime and excellent; nor does anything struggle against these

present goods but that which longs for greater and truer things. Let us not despair of being able to find it, if we turn our thoughts in all directions; for no slight or trifling rewards are sought." 46.

## Chapter V

### Principles By Which to Determine the True End of Life

After examining and setting aside the conflicting notions of the philosophers on the end of life, Lactantius then well asks, "In such a difference of opinions, whom do we follow? Whom do we believe?"<sup>1.</sup>

He sets himself to the task of giving some principles by which may be determined the true end of life. He makes the preliminary remark that a true end of life should have reference to man alone.<sup>2.</sup> Since the inquiry is respecting the duty of man, and because man has a nature different from that of any other terrestrial creatures, his chief good must consist in something peculiar to himself, and this, which false wisdom has overlooked, true wisdom fully teaches."<sup>3.</sup> The chief good of man should be placed in that which is peculiar to man, and which he does not have in common with other animals.

"Something peculiar to himself ought to be attributed to man, without which he would lose the fixed order of his condition.. For that which is given to all for the purpose of life or generation, is indeed a natural good; but still it is not the greatest, unless it be peculiar to each class." <sup>4.</sup>

The second principle that Lactantius suggests by which to determined the true end of life, is that it should belong peculiarly to the mind.<sup>5.</sup>

"We are not born for this purpose, that we may see those things which are created, but that we may contemplate, that is, behold with our mind, the Creator of all things Himself." 6.

The third and final principle by which to determine the true end of life is that it cannot be attained without virtue.<sup>7.</sup> By the aid of these three principles, Lactantius

shows the futility of the philosopher's doctrines on the subject. He attacks them by asserting that their speech is at variance with their lives,<sup>8.</sup> and quotes Seneca as saying,

"Philosophy is nothing else than the right method of living, or the science of living honorably, or the art of passing a good life."<sup>9.</sup> Lactantius, however, is not satisfied with

this definition and reasons that Seneca probably did not refer to the common name of philosophy because there is nothing certain, nothing on which all agree as is evidenced by the many sects and systems; and therefore, what can be so false as to call philosophy the rule of life, since the very diversity of its precepts is an obstacle to right living<sup>10.</sup>

and causes confusion. Lactantius says that philosophy renders "all things uncertain, abrogates law, esteems art as nothing, subverts method, distorts rule, entirely takes away knowledge."<sup>11.</sup> He says that there has been established

"no system, or science, or law of living well", except in the only true and heavenly wisdom, which was unknown to the philosophers. Earthly wisdom, since it is false, becomes varied and multiplied, and altogether opposed to itself. But

as there is but one creator and ruler of the world, God, and as truth is one; so, Lactantius reasons, wisdom must also be simple and one, because, if anything is true and good, it cannot be perfect unless it is the only one of its kind. 12.

But, even if philosophy were able to form life, Lactantius points out that no others but philosophers would be good, and all others who had not learned philosophy would be bad. He indicates that there are, and always have been, innumerable persons who are or have been good without learning, but it is seldom that we hear anything praiseworthy of philosophers. 13.

He says, "Who is there I pray, who does not see that those men are not teachers of virtue, of which they themselves are destitute?" 14.

To further strengthen his point, Lactantius quotes Tullius:

"How few of philosophers are found of such a character, so constituted in soul and life as reason demands! How few are obedient to themselves, and submit to their own decrees! We may see some of such levity and ostentation, that it would be better for them not to have learned at all; others eagerly desirous of money, others of glory; many the slaves of lusts, so that their speech wonderfully disagrees with their life." 15.

Seneca is also quoted as follows:

"Many of the philosophers are of this description, eloquent to their own condemnation: for if you should hear them arguing against avarice, against lust and ambition, you would think that they were making a public disclosure of their own character, so entirely do the censures which they utter in public flow back upon themselves." 16.

In explaining the necessity of this third principle that the true end of life cannot be attained apart from virtue, Lactantius remarks,

"But they who merely teach without acting, of themselves detract from the weight of their own precepts; for who would obey, when they who give the precepts themselves teach disobedience? Moreover, it is a good thing to give right and honourable precepts; but unless you also practice them it is a deceit, and it is inconsistent and trifling to have goodness not in the heart, but on the lips." 17.



## Chapter VI

The End of Life According to Lactantius

As a background to the statement of Lactantius' own point of view in regard to the true end of life, it might be well to give the following:

"And because the philosophers did not comprehend this main point,<sup>1</sup> they were neither able to comprehend truth, although they for the most part both saw and explained those things of which the main point itself consists. But different persons brought forward all these things, and in different ways, not connecting the causes of things, nor the consequences, nor the reasons, so that they might join together and complete that main point which comprises the whole." 2.

Did Lactantius overthrow philosophy as such? And did he think that the philosophers had none of the truth?

"It is easy to show that almost the whole truth has been divided by philosophers and sects. For we do not overthrow philosophy, as the Academics are accustomed to do, whose plan was to reply to everything, which is rather to calumniate and mock; but we show that no sect was so much out of the way, and no philosophy so vain, as not to see something of the truth. But while they are made with the desire of contradicting, while they defend their own arguments even though false, and overthrow those of others even though true, not only has the truth escaped from them, which they pretended that they were seeking, but they themselves lost it chiefly through their own fault. But if there had been any one to collect together the truth which was dispersed amongst individuals and scattered amongst sects, and to reduce it to a body, he assuredly would not disagree with us. But no one is able to do this, unless he has experience, and knowledge of the truth. But to know the truth belongs to him only who has been taught of God." 3.

Let us endeavor to follow the reasoning of Lactantius:

"Therefore, leaving the authors of this earthly philosophy, who bring forward nothing certain, let us approach the right path; for if I considered these to be sufficiently suitable guides to a good life, I would follow them myself, and exhort others to follow them. But since they disagree among one another with great contention, and are for the most part at variance with themselves, it is evident that their path is by no means straightforward; since they have severally marked out distinct ways for themselves according to their own will, and have left great confusion to those who are seeking for the truth. But since the truth is revealed from heaven to us who have received the mystery of true religion, and since we follow God, the teacher of wisdom and the guide to truth, we call together all, without any distinction either of sex or age, to heavenly pasture. For there is no more pleasant food for the soul than the knowledge of the truth." 4.

Lactantius feels that we must provide for these philosophers who are groping in error, that they may not fight against themselves, and that they may be willing at length  
5.  
to be freed from inveterate error.

"And this they will assuredly do if they shall at any time see for what purpose they were born; for this is the cause of their perverseness, -- namely, ignorance of themselves: and if any one, having gained the knowledge of the truth shall have shaken off this ignorance, he will know to what object his life is to be directed, and how it is to be spent. And I thus briefly define the sum of this knowledge, that neither is any religion to be undertaken without wisdom, nor any wisdom to be approved of without religion." 6.

Lactantius develops this thesis to its ultimate conclu-

sion and rather elaborately defends the doctrine that,

"The one chief good, therefore, is immortality, for the reception of which we were originally formed and born. To this we direct our course; human nature regards this; to this virtue exalts us." 7.

He thought that the arguments of Plato, although they contribute much to the subject of immortality, do little to prove it, "since he had neither summed up and collected into one the plan of the whole of this great mystery, nor had he comprehended the chief good. For although he perceived the truth respecting immortality of the soul, yet he did not speak respecting it as though it were the chief good." 8.

Man's immortality is believed by Christians, says Lactantius, on divine authority:

"We therefore, are able to elicit the truth by more certain signs; for we have not collected it by doubtful surmise, but have known it by divine instruction." 9.

It is interesting to note, however, that Lactantius does not state the argument from divine testimony. After presenting the chief heads of Plato's reasoning in favor of immortality, Lactantius mentions Pythagoras as also being of the same mind and says that Cicero reported him as the first to discourse upon the immortality of the soul. 10. Then other philosophers 11. who opposed the doctrine were cited. Finally Lactantius says that even Tullius declared he did not

know what was the truth after considering all these opinions. He is quoted as saying, "Since each of these opinions had most learned defenders, it cannot be divined what is certain-<sup>12.</sup>

ty." But Lactantius observes that we have no need of divination, since "the divinity itself has laid open to us<sup>13.</sup> the truth."

As a basis for his first argument for immortality, Lactantius says that God is invisible, and yet if any one denied His existence, he would not only refuse to call such an one a philosopher, but would even deny him the name of a man. Furthermore, God made many things. We see the power of their manifestations, but cannot behold their substance. Take for example: the voice, the wind, smell. Thus God is not to be perceived through the senses but through the eyes of the mind.

"Before all things, since God cannot be seen by man, lest any one should imagine from this circumstance that God does not exist, because He was not seen by mortal eyes, among other wonderful arrangements He also made many things the power of which is manifest, but the substance is not seen, as the voice, smell, the wind, that by the token and example of these things we might perceive God from His power and operations and works, although He did not fall under the notice of our eyes.....God is not to be perceived by us through the sight or other frail sense; But He is to be beheld by the eyes of the mind, since we see His illustrious and wonderful works." 14.

After a few remarks concerning philosophers who did not

believe in the existence of God and therefore fell into  
absurdities which necessarily followed such a sentiment, 15.  
Lactantius reasons that if there is a God who is invisible  
and likewise incorporeal and eternal, is it not reasonable  
that the soul also, although it is invisible, yet does not  
perish after its departure from the body.

"But if there is a God who is incorporeal, invisible, and eternal, therefore it is credible that the soul, since it is not seen, does not perish after its departure from the body; for its is manifest that something exists which perceives and is vigorous, and yet does not come into sight. But it is said, it is difficult to comprehend with the mind how the soul can retain its perception without those parts of the body in which the office of perception is contained. What about God? Is it easy to comprehend how He is vigorous without a body? But if they believe in the existence of gods who, if they exist, are plainly destitute of bodies, it must be that human souls can exist in the same way, since it is perceived from reason itself, and discernment, that there is in a certain resemblance in man and God." 16.

A second proof which is urged for immortality is that no other animal has any knowledge of God. Religion is primarily that which distinguishes man from the dumb creation. And if this does distinguish man, Lactantius is of the opinion that it certainly points to the fact that our aim and desire is that which is to be familiar and near.

"The immortality of the soul may be discerned from the fact that there is no

other animal which has any knowledge of God; and religion is almost the only thing which distinguishes man from the dumb creation. And since this falls to man alone, it assuredly testifies that we may aim at, desire, and cultivate that which is about to be familiar and very near." 17.

Somewhat in the same strain, we are reminded that man alone of all animals is of the upright position; he alone is divine. He goes in search of his origin, not caring for the earth, because he realizes that the highest good is to be searched in the highest place, and hence man looks towards his Maker.

"Can any one, when he has considered the nature of other animals, which the providence of the Supreme God has made abject, with bodies bending down and prostrated to the earth, so that it may be understood from this that they have no intercourse with heaven, fail to understand that man alone of all animals is heavenly and divine, whose body raised from the ground, elevated countenance, and upright position, goes in quest of its origin, and despising, as it were, the lowliness of the earth, reaches forth to that which is on high, because he perceives that the highest good is to be sought in the highest place, and mindful of his condition in which God made him illustrious, looks toward his Maker?" 18.

Another indication of immortality is that, since man alone enjoys wisdom, which really is the knowledge of God, the soul remains always because it seeks after and

loves God.

"Since therefore wisdom, which is given to man alone, is nothing else but the knowledge of God, it is evident that the soul does not perish, nor undergo dissolution, but that it remains forever, because it seeks after and loves God, who is everlasting, by the impulse of its very nature perceiving either from what source it has sprung, or to what it is about to return." 19.

An argument which to us may seem a little strange, and yet which Lactantius considered of "no slight proof", is that man alone makes use of fire, the heavenly element of life and light. Other creatures, because they are of earth and mortal, use water, the earthly and heavy element; but it is evident that man who uses fire, partakes of an immortal condition because the cause of life is familiar to him.

"Moreover, it is no slight proof of immortality that man alone makes use of the heavenly element. For, since the nature of the world consists of two elements which are opposed to one another--fire and water--of which the one is assigned to the heaven, the other to the earth, the other living creatures, because they are of the earth and mortal, make use of fire, which is an element light, rising upward, and heavenly. But those things which are weighty depress to death, and those which are light elevate to life; because life is on high, and death below. And as there cannot be light without fire, so there cannot be life without light. Therefore, fire is the element

of light and life; from which it is evident that man who uses it is a partaker of an immortal condition, because that which causes life is familiar to him." 20.

Virtue is likewise considered a great proof that souls are immortal. If virtue prohibited man from goods which he naturally desires and made him endure evils which he would naturally avoid, it would follow that virtue is an evil. But if virtue is not an evil, and acts honourably and discharges its duty in that it bravely despises wicked pleasures because it fears neither pain nor death, it is reasonable that it must be rewarded by some greater good than those things which it despised. After death what good can be expected other than immortality?

"The gift of virtue also to man alone is great proof that souls are immortal. For this will not be in accordance with nature if the soul is extinguished; for it is injurious to this present life. For that earthly life, which we lead in common with dumb animals, both seeks pleasure, by the varied and agreeable fruits of which it is delighted, and avoids pain, the harshness of which, by its unpleasant sensations, injures the nature of living beings, and endeavors to lead them to death, which dissolves the living being. If, therefore, virtue both prohibits man from those goods which are naturally desired, and impels him to endure evils which are naturally avoided, it follows that virtue is an evil, and opposed to nature; and he must necessarily be judged foolish who pur-



sues it, since he injures himself both by avoiding present goods, and by seeking equally evils, without hope of greater advantage. For when it is permitted us to enjoy the sweetest pleasures, should we not prefer to live in loneliness, in want, in contempt and ignominy, or not to live at all, but to be tormented with pain, and to die, when from these evils we should gain nothing to compensate us for the pleasure which we have given up? But if virtue is not an evil, and acts honourably, inasmuch as it neither fears pain nor death, that it may discharge its duty, therefore it must obtain some greater good than those things are which it despises. But when death has been undergone, what further good can be hoped for except immortality?" 21.

The chief good, for Lactantius, therefore, is found in immortality, which pertains to no other animal.

It cannot be attained, however, without the virtue of knowledge, that is, without the knowledge of God and justice. 22.

He reasons that if this life which is short and full of labor is considered a great good, how much more to be desired is a life which has no end and is free from all evil. 23.

He says that reflection itself, weighing everything, leads us to that "excellent and surpassing good", on account of which we were born. 24.

Lactantius reasons that virtue is set before us that lusts might be subdued, and the desire for earthly things overcome, until our souls, pure and victorious, may return to God, their original source. 25.

According to Lactantius, a happy life has no existence either in the worship of the gods or in philosophy.<sup>26.</sup> We must seek the highest good in the highest place; and what is the highest but heaven, and God,<sup>27.</sup> from whom the soul has its origin? The chief good, therefore, cannot exist, "unless it be in that religion and doctrine to which is annexed the hope of immortality."<sup>28</sup>

In bringing the third book to a close, Lactantius eloquently urges an obedient reception of the true religion:<sup>29.</sup>

"Let him who wishes to be wise and happy bear the voice of God, learn righteousness, understand the mystery of his birth, despise human affairs, embrace divine things, that he may gain that chief good to which he was born." 30.

The seventh and last book of the Divine Institutes has for its subject the happy life. Lactantius asks of what use is it to be either freed from false religions or to understand the true one. "Of what avail to hold the worship of God with great difficulties, which is the greatest virtue, unless the divine reward of everlasting blessedness attends it?"<sup>31.</sup> He proposes in this book to prove that future things are to be preferred to the present, the heavenly to be preferred to the earthly, and eternal things to those which are temporal because the rewards of vices are temporal, but virtue has an eternal

32.  
reward.

Lactantius disagrees with Plato and Aristotle in regard to the eternity of the world, "since whatever is of a solid and heavy body, as it received a beginning at some time, so it must needs have an end." 33. Lactantius

reasons that whatever exists must at some time have had a beginning. He says nothing can exist at all if it did not have a beginning. 34. Everything we can see must

necessarily be material, and hence capable of dissolution. 35. Lactantius says that it has been determined by

God that this unrighteous age should come to an end at the appointed time. All wickedness will be put out; but the righteous will be recalled to a happy life: "a quiet, tranquil, peaceful, in short, golden age, as the poets call it, should flourish, under the rule of God Himself." 36.

Man consists of two parts: the body, which is earthly, and the soul, which is heavenly. Likewise two lives have been assigned to man: a temporal life which is received at birth for the body, and an everlasting life for the soul which is attained by striving for it. Thus man does not enjoy immortality without some difficulty.

We receive the life of the body ignorantly; but the eternal life of the soul is received knowingly because it is not given to nature, but to virtue, for God desired us to procure life for ourselves in life. 37. That is why He

has given us this present life. We may either lose the true and eternal life by our vices, or win it by virtue. The chief end of life is not contained in this life because it will be destroyed by divine necessity even as it was given us by divine necessity. Hence, "that which has an end does not contain the chief good." The true end is contained in the spiritual life we acquire by ourselves because it cannot contain evil or have an end. Immortality is not "the consequence of nature, but the reward and recompense of virtue."  
38.

Man does not walk upright at birth, but on all fours, in common with dumb animals. As he gains strength, man raises himself, is able to speak, and ceases to be a dumb animal. Lactantius says this argument teaches that man is mortal, but that afterwards he becomes immortal when he begins to live in conformity with the will of God, meaning by this, to follow justice which is comprised in the worship of God. This takes place, when man "purified in the heavenly laver, lays aside his infancy together with all the pollution of his past life, and having received an increase of divine vigor, becomes a perfect and complete man."  
39.

God has set virtue before man, and although the soul and body are connected together, yet they are contrary and oppose one another. The things which are good for the soul are evil for the body, and vice versa. This

temporal life, therefore, ought to be subject to the eternal life, just as the body is subject to the soul. If any prefer the life of the soul they must despise that of the body; nor will they in any way be able to strive after that which is highest, unless they despise the things which are lowest. The one who prefers to live well for eternity, will live badly or in discomfort for a time upon earth, that he may receive heavenly consolation. But who prefers to live well here on earth, will live ill for eternity.<sup>40.</sup> He will be condemned by God to eternal punishment because he preferred earthly to heavenly goods. This is why God seeks to be worshipped and to be honoured by man as a Father, that he may have virtue and wisdom, which produce immortality. God alone possesses immortality. Hence none other than He is able to confer it; and He will grant it to pious men who have honoured Him, as a reward to be blessed for all eternity<sup>41.</sup> and to be forever in the presence of God.

The advantage of vices is immediate, even as the pleasures themselves are short and temporary; but that of virtue is future and everlasting. In this life there is no reward of virtue because virtue itself still exists; it never ends except by death and therefore, the reward of virtue is after death.<sup>42.</sup> In fact, even the desires of the body are temporal, that is, food, shelter, clothing, pleasure, et cetera, and hence mortal; but the

soul desires the worship of God and thus indicates that it is everlasting. From which it is credible that "the soul does not perish, but is separated from the body, because the body can do nothing without the soul, but the soul can do many and great things without the body." <sup>43.</sup>

And in concluding his last book, Lactantius earnestly exhorts all "to undertake wisdom together with true religion, the strength and office of which depends on this, that, despising earthly things and laying aside errors we formerly held.....we may be directed to the eternal rewards of the heavenly treasure." <sup>44.</sup> And he remarks how great a happiness it must be thought to withdraw from earth and go to be with the Father who gives rest in place of labor, gives life for death, brightness for darkness, and in place of short and earthly goods, gives us those which are eternal and heavenly. This reward can in no way be compared or equalled to the hardships we endure in this world. God who saw the errors of men sent a Guide who might open to us the way of righteousness. Lactantius urges all to follow Him, since He alone has explained the true end which we all strive to reach, and has pointed out the road by which we may attain it. <sup>45.</sup> After death we can take nothing with us, except a well and innocently spent life, for whoever by his virtue has "trampled upon the corruptions of the earth, the Supreme and truth arbiter will raise him to life

46.  
and perpetual light." Lactantius therefore entreats  
all to apply themselves to righteousness, which alone will  
lead them to God. He urges everyone to serve God with an  
unwearying service and engage boldly with the enemy (Satan),  
that victorious over our conquered adversary, we may obtain  
from the Lord "that reward of valour which He Himself  
47.  
has promised."

In concluding this chapter I give Lactantius' conception of the true end of life in what he himself called  
48.  
the "whole argument by a brief definition":

"The whole world has been created for this purpose, that we may be born; we are born for this end, that we may acknowledge the Maker of the world and of ourselves - God; we acknowledge Him for this end, that we may worship Him; we worship Him for this end, that we may receive immortality as the reward of our labours, since the worship of God consists of the greatest labours; for this end we are rewarded with immortality, that being made like to the angels, we may serve the Supreme Father and Lord for ever, and may be to all eternity a kingdom to God. This is the sum of all things."

## Chapter VII

### Evaluation and Conclusion

The coming of Christianity made a great difference in philosophy. Back of Greek philosophy was always the problem of a happy life. The outcome of philosophy, therefore, should be happiness. But it was Christianity that pointed out the way of salvation. This was what man longed for. The philosopher's solution was open only to philosophers, but Christianity opened the way to happiness for every one. Men no longer had to search or pursue it, but happiness, salvation, was now given them. The condition of happiness was no longer acuteness of mind, but faith. Those who accepted this faith received a satisfying answer; and many of the early Christians writers found Christianity so wonderful, so superior to philosophy, that they lost interest in speculative problems. All that philosophy could offer was obtained in Christianity. Lactantius now had something much more important than philosophy; he was eager to spread the knowledge of this wonderful Gospel and to defend its truth. This, no doubt at least in part, explains the severity with which Lactantius discusses the end of life in various philosophers. But I do not think he overthrew philosophy as such. Learned in pagannlore, he did not forget his knowledge when he became a Christian, but made it serve Christianity.

There is no question but that Lactantius was a writer



of no mean erudition and intelligence. He had a wide range of knowledge, although at times he appears to be very superficial and unfair in his statements. On the other hand, there is a sincerity and an earnest contention for what he felt to be true, that we cannot but admire.

Concerning Lactantius as a critic of philosophy, I  
1.  
quote from one who has made a thorough study of this problem:  
"It is not a criticism of philosophy as philosophy that we often get, but a criticism of philosophy from the point of view of the philosophers character of religion. Wherefore, in the fullest and strictest sense of the word, Lactantius  
2.  
is not a critic."

Lactantius was raised up in an age which needed not only a Christian advocate, but an advocate in the person of a Christian scholar. Christianity had long been engaged in an unequal conflict with heathenism, so far as human forces on both sides were concerned. Lactantius felt that there was a great deficiency of able teachers who might expose the public errors, and in an attractive manner defend the cause of truth. Perhaps he thought that by giving the defence of true religion a literary charm, many, even of its enemies, might be drawn to an examination of it and discover that true wisdom and true religion are conjoined. It is from this point of view that he ought to be judged.

It has been said that "the history of philosophy is  
3.  
but a recital of a litany of so-called summum bonums."

Lactantius was certain he pointed the way to true happiness, for his supreme end was God. Only in an infinite God can the infinite desires of man be satisfied. Man desires a happiness that is complete, one in which every desire is fulfilled.

The important questions in a consideration of the end of life are, In what object or objects is this perfect or satisfying end found? And secondly, What is the nature of this object or end? We have seen that Lactantius answers the first question emphatically and repeatedly: the true end of life is immortality.

"The one chief good, therefore, is immortality, for the reception of which we were originally formed and born. To this we direct our course; human nature regards this; to this virtue exalts us." 4.

"When death has been undergone, what further good can be hoped for except immortality?" 5.

"The whole world has been created for this purpose, that we may be born; we are born for this end, that we may acknowledge the Maker of the world and of ourselves - God; we acknowledge Him for this end, that we may worship Him; we worship Him for this end, that we may receive immortality as the reward of our labors, since the worship of God consists of the greatest labors." 6.

But on the second question, that is, What is the nature of immortality, Lactantius is very unsatisfactory. He does tell us that the end of life does not consist in any created

good. "We are not born for this purpose, that we may see those things which are created, but that we may contemplate, that is, behold with our mind, the Creator of all things Himself."<sup>7.</sup> God alone possesses immortality and hence

none other than He is able to confer it. He will grant it to pious men who have honored Him, as a reward to be blessed for all eternity and to be forever in the presence of God.<sup>8.</sup> He tells us further that immortality has no

end and is free from all evil.<sup>9.</sup> It is not "the consequence of nature, but the reward and recompense of virtue."<sup>10</sup>

He remarks how great a happiness it must be thought to withdraw from earth and go to be with the Father who gives rest in place of labor, gives life for death, brightness for darkness, and in place of short and earthly goods, gives us those which are eternal and heavenly. This reward can in no way be compared or equalled to the hardships we endure in this world.<sup>11.</sup>

In another place, Lactantius tells us that immortality is the reward of our labors....that being made like to angels, we may serve the Supreme Father and Lord for ever, and may be to all eternity a kingdom to God."<sup>12.</sup>

In his immortal state, man will be wise and free from evil as God is. "Man, having received the garment of immortality, will be wise and free from evil, as God is."<sup>13.</sup> He tells us that God made the world for

man's sake, and man for His own sake. Man alone has been so created that he can fellowship with God and contemplate

Him.

"What more evident argument can be brought forward that God both made the world for the sake of man, and man for His own sake, than that he alone of all living creatures has been so formed that his eyes are directed towards heaven, his face looking towards God, his countenance is in fellowship with his Parent, so that God appears, as it were, with outstretched hand to have raised man from the ground, and to have elevated him to the contemplation of Himself." 14.

From the above we conclude that Lactantius merely defends and insists upon the chief good as consisting in immortality. He gives proofs for immortality, without clearly defining it. His basis is divine authority and so the chief good cannot exist "unless it be in that religion and doctrine to which is annexed the hope of immortality." Apparently, since his work is an apology for Christianity, giving a philosophical defense of its major tenets, he seems to be content with insisting upon immortality, "for the reception of which we were originally formed and born", as a superior end of life to that of pagan philosophers, and makes no further attempt to explain the nature of immortality other than indicated above.

In the meaning he attaches to it, how is immortality superior as an end of life to the end proposed by others and rejected by Lactantius? We have found that various philosophers had diverse and strange notions concerning the end of life. For some it consisted in wealth, for others in

health, some held it to be honor, and still others, pleasure. But we note that all these are goods of the body. How could man himself be the end of the universe? He is but a particular being, ordered, like all others, in view of a superior end. Hence, the satisfaction and preservation of the body cannot constitute the supreme good. In this respect, then, Lactantius was right when he said, "The chief good is not contained in this bodily life....that which has an end does not contain the chief good."<sup>15.</sup> And again, "Man....reaches forth to that which is on high, because he perceives that the highest good is to be sought in the highest place, and mindful of his condition in which God made him illustrious, looks toward his Maker."<sup>16.</sup> Then too, those whom Lactantius criticized placed perfect happiness in a created good; for him the final good was an uncreated good, God. "We are not born for this purpose, that we may see those things which are created, but that we may contemplate, that is, behold, with our mind, the Creator of all things Himself."<sup>17.</sup> We would say that the end of man has to do with the whole of man, a perfect good, fully satisfying and leaving nothing to be desired. On this point, however, Lactantius is ambiguous. He explicitly speaks only of the soul as being immortal. "The soul does not perish, but is separated from the body, because the body can do nothing without the soul, but the soul can do many and great things without the body."<sup>18.</sup> Again,

"Man consists of two parts, body and soul, of which is the one earthly, the other heavenly, two lives have been assigned to man: the one temporal, which is appointed for the body; the other everlasting, which belongs to the soul....That earthly one is as the body, and therefore has an end; but this heavenly one is as the soul, and therefore has no limit."<sup>19.</sup>

We know, however, that immortality has not only to do with the soul, but also a sort of spiritualized body.

After his resurrection our Lord had a body when he walked with the two men on the way to Emmaus;<sup>20.</sup> yet we know that

He appeared in the midst of the disciples, "the doors being shut".<sup>21.</sup>

He had a body, but evidently it was not subject to material limitations. Finally, Lactantius was superior to others in this regard, they followed their own reason and fleshly desire in determining the end of life, he based his on divine revelation. "We, therefore, are able to elicit the truth by more certain signs; for we have not collected it by doubtful surmise, but have known it by

divine instruction."<sup>22.</sup>

Lactantius realized and eloquently defend the thesis that the result of all philosophy when brought into relation with our true end of life fails utterly to satisfy the deeper needs and aspirations of man's spiritual nature. Our hearts thirst after happiness and completeness. This eager and fervent desire, no human wisdom can satiate. He finds the fundamental condition for the satisfaction of these

desires, the true end of life, the highest good in the union of wisdom with religion, and its ultimate realization in immortality.

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

1. The Divine Institutes, Trans. William Fletcher, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1890, Bk. I, Preface, p. 9.
2. Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1890, Vol. VII, p. 5.

### CHAPTER II

1. St. Jerome in De Viris Illustribus c. 80, names him as Firmianus, qui et Lactantius, Firmianus who is also Lactantius, thus, perhaps, connecting him with Firmium. His full name, as given in Migne: Patrologia Latina, tome VI, is Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius. The biography given in this volume tells us that the name Lactantius was added from the Latin, lac, milk, to indicate the smooth flow of his eloquence. But this we need not believe.
2. Sylvester, Writings of Mankind, Vol. VII, p. 3518.
3. Among those that hold this view are Adam Clarke, Schaff-Herzog, Wace, and Piercy.
4. Biblical and Theological Cyclopaedia, p. 186.
5. Ante-Nicene Fathers, p. 5.
6. Biblical and Theological Cyclopaedia, p. 186.
7. Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol. VII, p. 394.
8. De Viris Illustribus, c. 80.
9. The Christian Review, September 1845, p. 418.
10. The Biblical and Theological Cyclopaedia suggests that the Divine Institutes were probably written about 320. Some suppose that the work was commenced in Bithynia and completed in Gaul after a lapse of twenty years. Others, from an allusion which it contains to the Diocletian persecution (V, 17), suppose it to have been written before Lactantius went to Gaul. p. 187.
11. Writings of Mankind, p. 3519.
12. The Symposium of Lactantius has probably perished, though



some have surmised that the Aenigmata, published under the name of Symposium, is really the youthful composition of Lactantius. Jerome mentions also an Itinerarium in hexameters, two books to Asclepiades, eight books of letters to Probus, Severus, and Domitian, all of which are lost.

13. Kruger, History of Early Christian Literature, p. 309.
14. The oldest manuscripts are Cod. Bononiensis of the sixth or seventh century, and the Cod. Sangallensis of the sixth or seventh century. The Editio Princeps appeared at Subiaco in 1465; it is the first dated book printed in Italy. During the eighteenth century appeared in the complete editions of Chr. A. Heumann, Gottingen, 1736; F. L. Buenemann, Leipzig, 1739; F. B. LeBrun and N. Lenglet du Fresnoy, Paris, 1748; F. Eduardus S. Xzverio, Rome, 1754-59. The edition of LeBrun and Du Fresnoy is reprinted in Migne, P. L., Paris, 1844; L.C.F. Lactanti opera omnia, S. Brandt et G. Laubmann, Vienna, 1890-97. Freppel, Commodien, Arnobee, Lactance, Paris, 1893, pp. 94-148. H. Glaesner, Several grammatical and philosophical articles in Musee Belge, 1901, S. Brandt: "Lactantius und Lactetius" in Neue Jahrb.furPhilologie, (1891), 225-259; P. Gotth. Frotscher: Des Apologeten Lactantius Verhaltnis zur Griech. Philos. (dissert.), Leipzig, 1895; M.E.Heinig: Die Ethik des Lactantius (dissert.), Leipzig, 1887. R. Pichon: Lactance. Etude sur mouvements philosophiques et religieux sur le regne de Constantin. Paris, 1903.
15. Wace and Piercy, Dictionary of Christian Biography, p.640: "The tract De Officio Dei may challenge comparison with Cicero's De Natura Deorum in point of style, and it is far superior to it in depth, and originality."
16. Biblical and Theological Cyclopaedia, p. 186.
17. Piercy, Who's Who, says, "His classical knowledge, and his confidence in himself, perhaps, outran his theological erudition."
18. References to the fact that Lactantius was a convert from paganism may be found in his work, De Ira Dei, c.2.
19. Smith and Wace, Dictionary of Christian Biography, p. 614.
20. Biblical and Theological Cyclopaedia, p. 186.
21. Ibid.
22. Especially De Opificio Dei.

23. Biblical and Theological Cyclopaedia, p. 186.
24. Ibid.
25. Writings of Mankind, p. 3519.
26. Decline and Fall, p. 158.

### CHAPTER III

1. Divine Institutes, III, i, p. 69.
2. Ibid.
3. Divine Institutes, I, Preface.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Divine Institutes, I, i.
7. Ibid.
8. Divine Institutes, II, i.
9. Divine Institutes, II, viii.
10. Divine Institutes, III, i.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Divine Institutes, III, xiii.
15. Workmanship of God, c. 20.
16. Ibid.
17. Divine Institutes, III, i.
18. Divine Institutes, III, iv.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.

21. Divine Institutes, III, iv.
22. Divine Institutes, III, vii.
23. Ibid.

#### CHAPTER IV

1. Divine Institutes, III, viii.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Divine Institutes, III, xvii.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Divine Institutes, III, xvii.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.

22. Epitome, c. xxxiii.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Divine Institutes, III, viii.
26. Ibid.
27. Epitome, XXXIII.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Epitome, c. xxxiii.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Divine Institutes, III, viii.
37. Epitome, c. xxxiii.
38. Ibid.
39. Divine Institutes, III, viii.
40. Epitome, xxxiii.
41. Terence: Phormio, v. 2.
42. Divine Institutes, VII, ii.
43. Divine Institutes, III, ii.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.

## CHAPTER V

1. Divine Institutes, III, viii.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Divine Institutes, III, viii.

It has been observed that the Latin text here is, *Ut solius animi, nec communicari possit cum corpore*: That it should belong to the soul alone and could not be communicated to the body. This rule deserves some consideration. As a Christian Lactantius would undoubtedly believe in the resurrection and consequent immortality of the body. How then could he speak of the highest good as something which could not be communicated to the body? Is he just careless in expression? You would not expect him to be careless when he is giving one of his tests. Is he just wrong? In many points of Christian doctrine he was either wrong or at best rather loose in his way of explaining it. A list of such points can be found in Migne, tome VI.

St. Jerome says, (Epist. 13, Ad Paulinum): *Lactantius quasi quidam fluvius eloquentiae Tullianae, utinam tam nostra confirmare potuisset quam facile aliena destruxit.* "Lactantius is as it were a stream of Tullian eloquence. Too bad he cannot prove our side as easily as he overturns the other side."

6. Divine Institutes, III, viii.
7. Ibid.
8. Divine Institutes, III, vx.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Divine Institutes, III, xv.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.

16. Divine Institutes, III, xv.

17. Ibid.

#### CHAPTER VI

1. That is, why the world and man were created.

2. Divine Institutes, VII, vii.

3. Ibid.

4. Divine Institutes, I, i.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Divine Institutes, VII, viii.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Dicaearchus, Democritus, and Epicurus.

12. Divine Institutes, VII, viii.

13. Ibid.

14. Divine Institutes, VII, ix.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Divine Institutes, VII, ix.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Divine Institutes, III, xii.

23. Divine Institutes, III, xii.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Divine Institutes, III, xii.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Divine Institutes, III, xxx.
30. Ibid.
31. Divine Institutes, VII, i.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Divine Institutes, VII, ii.
37. Divine Institutes, VII, v.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Compare with St. John 12:25, "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world, shall keep it unto life eternal."
41. Divine Institutes, VII, v.
42. Divine Institutes, VII, x.
43. Divine Institutes, VII, xi.
44. Divine Institutes, VII, xxvii.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Divine Institutes, VII, vi.

## CHAPTER VII

1. Vitale, P. H., Lactantius as a Critic of Greek Philosophy.
2. Ibid., p. 112.
3. Perkins, Jos. A., Notes on the Principles of Ethics, Intro.
4. Divine Institutes, VII, viii.
5. Op. cit., VII, ix.
6. Op. cit., VII, vi.
7. Divine Institutes, III, viii.
8. Op. cit., VII, v.
9. Divine Institutes, III, xii.
10. Divine Institutes, VII, v.
11. Op. cit., VII, xxvii.
12. Divine Institutes, VII, vi.
13. Op. cit., VII, v.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Divine Institutes, VII, ix.
17. Divine Institutes, III, viii.
18. Divine Institutes, VII, xi.
19. Op. cit., VII, v.
20. St. Luke, 24:13-32.
21. St. John, 20:26.
22. Divine Institutes, VII, viii.



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The thesis, "The End of Life in the Philosophy of Lactantius", written by Clara M. Jarvis, has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. Morris

March 18, 1940

Father McCormick

March 26, 1940